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Observations by U.S. Rep. Frank R. Wolf of Virginia
Visit to Western Africa: Sierra Leone After a Decade of Civil War
November 30 - December 8, 1999

This report provides details of a trip Congressman Tony Hall of Ohio and I made to Western Africa to see the conditions in Sierra Leone and in refugee camps nearby in Guinea. We spent two days in Sierra Leone and an additional day visiting refugee camps in bordering Guinea. The people desperately need an end to years of civil strife, terrorism and brutality. Humanitarian assistance in the form of food, medical and public health assistance is urgently required. The country's leaders are struggling with a most fragile peace accord and the community of nations must do whatever it can to strengthen it.

Our trip to Western Africa provided the opportunity to observe conditions in and around Sierra Leone resulting from a decade-long civil war. I have been to Africa a number of times, but this was my first time in Western Africa. Congressman Hall had visited Sierra Leone once about 10 years ago. I have followed the history of this country for a long while and have been looking for ways to help the people.

Sierra Leone is a part of the immense portion of Africa that juts westward into the Atlantic Ocean just above the equator. It is slightly larger than West Virginia and has a population of about 4.6 million of which about one half million people live in the capital of Freetown. Though the country is rich in natural resources, per capita

income is only about \$285, which ranks Sierra Leone among the very poorest



Victims of amputation in Sierra Leone face an uncertain future.

nations in the world. This can be attributed primarily to civil strife and rebel terrorism.

Sierra Leone gained independence from Great Britain in 1961 and a continuing struggle for self governance has followed. The elected government was toppled by an army coup in 1992 and a state of civil war has largely existed since. Elections were again held in 1996 when current President Kabbah emerged as the winner. He has held office ever since and his government, with military assistance from The Economic Community of West African States Military Observer Group (ECOMOG), has continued to battle rebel forces made up of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Armed Forces Revolutionary Counsel (AFRC). In July 1999, the Lome Peace Accords were finally signed and a very fragile peace is beginning to take hold in the region. Presently, it is the best hope if not the only hope to end years of brutality, poverty and despair in Sierra Leone.

On December 5, we visited two refugee camps in the Forecariah Province of Guinea located about 20 kilometers across the border from Sierra Leone. Each camp held thousands of refugees, some of whom have lived there for years. Barely adequate food supplies are dwindling and there was some unrest. There is little progress in educating the children or in pursuing efforts to upgrade an existence reduced to the most basic of simply sustaining life.



Congressmen Frank Wolf and Tony Hall comfort a tiny amputation victim in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

On December 6 and 7, we visited Sierra Leone and its capital of Freetown. We met with the President and with leaders of Parliament. We met rebel leaders, members of the clergy and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) representatives. And we met with many victims who will carry throughout their lives horrible physical and emotional scars of years of civil war perpetrated because of greed and power.



Families make a home wherever they can.

Existence for too many in Sierra Leone is one of hunger, homelessness, poverty and pain. And this seems strange. Sierra Leone is, or should be, an agricultural oasis. Its temperate climate, fertile soil and abundant rain should result in the production of crops and goods far above what the people could consume. The Atlantic Ocean yields an unending harvest of seafood and offers immediate access to important trade routes around the world. And the country is rich in diamonds and minerals for which there is a huge market and huge demand. Yet, because of the civil war, people are without even the basic necessities of life.

We visited a housing reclamation project established by Catholic Relief Services (CRS). Much of Freetown has been destroyed, looted and burned by rebel forces and CRS has started a program of helping people to rebuild their lost homes. The Sierra Leonians supply the labor, the muscle and much of the

raw material from other destroyed structures and CRS offers guidance, harder-to-get building supplies, food rations and a great deal of encouragement. Many new homes are rising out of the rubble. It is a good program.

We visited the Holy Mary Clinic. Two doctors, a husband and wife team, have been operating a clinic for several years to deal with young children who are the worst victims of the war. About 3,000 girls and boys have been taken hostage by rebel forces and many continue to be held today. Some 500 young girls have been returned. They have been horribly sexually abused and were used as sex slaves, temporary wives and household workers. They have been returned or have escaped and are psychologically devastated. Some have no parents left alive and have no one to turn to, no family to help them. Many are pregnant and have sexually transmitted diseases (STD). These are young girls, many are barely 14-years-old. The boys taken by the rebels are also young children and have been brainwashed, probably drugged and then recruited into the rebel army.



Holy Mary Clinic does a wonderful job of dealing with this trauma and with young infants and pregnant girls needing pre-natal and medical care and counseling. The clinic doctors rely on friends, colleagues and family from Italy for supplies, medicines and equipment. They are doing an outstanding job, but are stretched so thin and could use help. The AIDS virus adds to the despair and the

Bath day in a refugee camp near the border in Guinea.

hopelessness, too.

We visited a therapeutic feeding center where dozens of starving infants hover on the edge of death. These young children are so malnourished they have no strength to eat and are being force fed in an attempt to sustain life.

They are so thin and so fragile that we were afraid that they would break if we just even touched them.



New homes for a new generation must arise from the rubble.

We saw a former railroad repair factory converted to housing for displaced persons where thousands of homeless refugees are being warehoused. This huge former factory building provides a roof over the refugees' heads and little more. There were few indications of real help being applied to return refugees to a self-sufficient life.



Family dinner preparation under the hot sun in a refugee camp.

The Murray Town amputee camp is where victims of rebel brutality go after having their limbs mindlessly hacked off with machetes, axes or knives simply to frighten and terrorize. The amputees receive counseling, some medical care and the beginnings of assistance

with crutches and prostheses. They are also fed and have a place to stay.

One of the first people we saw was a 14-year-old girl whose parents had been killed. She was pregnant, having been raped by rebel soldiers, and had both hands cut off above the wrist. We saw tiny children who had lost limbs. We heard tales of a grotesque lottery where a person drew a slip from a bag. If the slip contained the word “hand”, “arm”, “leg”, “ear”, “both feet”, “head” or other parts of the body, then the rebels proceeded to carry out the sentence.



Congressman Hall comforts a starving infant in a Sierra Leone therapeutic feeding center. The child whose parents were killed is being cared for by her sister.

This sounds unbelievable, but we saw the painful results. Sometimes the rebel butcher offered a choice -- long sleeve or short sleeve. That meant: do you want your arm cut off at the wrist or above the elbow?

Yet one of the camp leaders who had lost his right arm this way told us of seeing the two rebels who mutilated him when they paid a visit to the amputee center. He said that he had forgiven them. He said it was time to move forward from this chapter of despair. Reconciliation is what he was talking about.

We heard a member of the clergy tell of listening to a small boy ask of the camp counselor, “When will my hands grow back?” The rebels abused children too young to even have an inkling of what was happening to them.

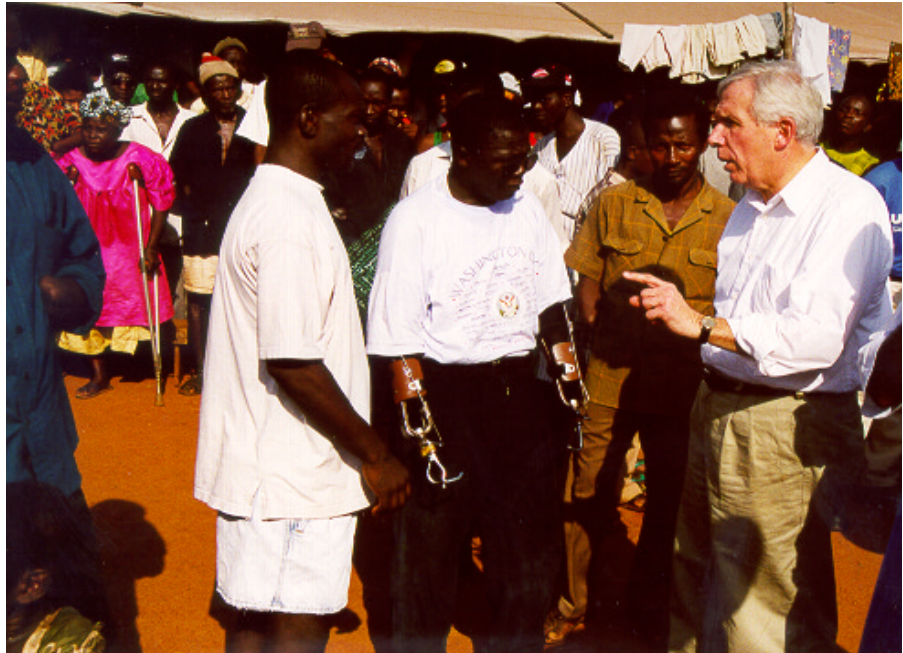
Comments and Recommendations

The West, including the U.S. and European Union (EU) nations, should quickly provide food and medical supplies to save lives which are in danger. The World Food Programme has asked that more food supplies be directed to Guinea and Sierra Leone so basic food needs can be met. We were told that the food allotment to the refugees is down from a caloric intake of 2,100 a day to

1,400 a day.

The civil war is largely being funded by the sale of unregulated diamonds (conflict diamonds) being mined in regions held by rebel forces. Congressman Hall has introduced legislation to certify the country of origin of all diamonds.

Thus a diamond buyer will know where diamonds have been mined and a purchaser can avoid buying conflict diamonds. Not only are the profits from these illicit diamonds used to fund a war of terror against the people of Sierra Leone, but the people



Congressman Wolf talks with victims at an amputation camp.

are being deprived of the benefits that these natural resources could offer their society. Passage of Congressman Hall's bill would be a huge stride in ending this practice. Also, we have written United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan asking the U.N. to sanction black-market diamonds that are not certified by the government of Sierra Leone.

Every effort should be made to support the current disarmament program which is in place but wobbly. More needs to be done to make it desirable for the rebels to turn in their weapons, come in out of the bush and rejoin society. So far only a few thousand out of about 45,000 rebels have surrendered their arms.

The West should exert every possible leverage on rebel leaders and also Charles Taylor in Liberia, who is aiding the rebels, to end the civil war. The fragile peace agreement between the government, the RUF, the AFRC and their leaders must be sustained, enforced and nourished. There is an African saying we heard, "When the elephants fight, the grass dies." This is certainly the case

here. Bad leaders motivated by greed and power have nearly destroyed a nation and its people.

Pressure from the U.S. government and others including European Union (EU) nations on the leadership of the RUF/AFRC to implement the provisions of the accord would be helpful in ensuring success.

Similar pressure on Liberian President Taylor to ensure that arms and men do not enter Sierra Leone from Liberia would also help.

The U.S. government joined by EU nations should send these leaders the message that unless peace is achieved, they will not be welcomed in the West. Their families and children will not be welcomed. No visas will be issued. Outside their borders, these leaders will be treated as war criminals and there will be no place for them to run and no place for them to spend their ill-gotten gains.

And the process of reconciliation for the people of Sierra Leone needs to begin. Here, as elsewhere around the globe, lasting peace will depend upon the people being able to reconcile their differences.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge and salute all those in the region who came from America and elsewhere to lend a hand to the people of Sierra Leone. The ambassadors and embassy staff personnel, the NGO representatives, doctors and medical staff and clergy who are there at personal risk and discomfort are truly making a difference, and I was so proud to see the job they are doing.

We saw the great service of citizens from Congressman Tony Hall's district in Dayton, Ohio. They have been working for years on schools, housing, training academies for the blind and other terribly needed programs that have been helping the people of Sierra Leone. It has been said that it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. The people of Dayton have ignited an eternal flame in Freetown.